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Merit pay proposal divides Tennessee educators

Obama's cash bonus idea revives issue state weighed in '07

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President Barack Obama's controversial call to reward top teachers with cash bonuses is getting mixed reviews from Middle Tennessee educators who have already passed up the chance to offer similar "merit pay."

State lawmakers in 2007 ordered all school districts to negotiate with unions and develop pay plans in which bonus pay was one option. Most districts instead chose to offer signing rewards for hard-to-staff positions and schools.

Now the issue of merit pay is back, but this time teachers unions may not have the option of whether to take part.

"Good teachers will be rewarded with more money for improved student achievement, and asked to accept more responsibilities for lifting up their schools," Obama said in a speech Tuesday to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Obama offered no details about how the government would define a good teacher or who would be eligible for such rewards.

Those are key details for educators determining whether to support the idea, said Earl Wiman, president of the Tennessee Education Association.

"We're not opposed to performance pay or to merit pay, but we are if they're going to be based on a single test score," he said. "Achievement tests were designed to help us ... see where we need to help children, not as a way to pay teachers more money."

Bonuses' effects studied

Metro schools are at the center of a three-year study by Vanderbilt University on whether bonuses affect test scores. Bonuses from \$5,000 to \$15,000 will be doled out to about 300 middle school math teachers who signed up to participate in the experiment, which will wrap up this year.

Critics of test-based bonuses say it's not fair to judge a teacher on a child's test score because factors outside of school can affect performance on test day. That's more common for at-risk children who come to school hungry or have disruptive home lives.

Others say there's no evidence that handing out bonuses would improve test scores, and that merit pay pits teachers against each other rather than encouraging them to work together.

"It fosters a sense of competition that doesn't need to be there," said Robert Baker, a math teacher at Hunters Lane High School. "We're trying to fostering a sense of collaboration."

Baker received a \$4,000 bonus when he signed on to teach at Hunters Lane as part of Metro's differentiated pay program launched this school year. About 50 teachers qualified for that program the first semester, school officials say, and around 20 more will be rewarded this semester.

Rutherford and Sumner districts proposed to reimburse teachers getting additional certification in math and special education. Wilson County offers college tuition reimbursement to teachers of certain

subjects.

Metro, like other districts, avoided the merit pay option, but officials say they plan to revisit the issue during teacher contract negotiations this year. Incentive pay helped the district fill hard-to-staff positions, and now the focus is on retention, said June Keel, assistant superintendent of human resources.

"We've done something to get people there, but we need to do something to keep people there," Keel said.

Union is open to idea

Skeptics aren't sure teachers can be retained with bonus dollars and say teacher training and mentoring is a better way to ensure job satisfaction.

Another is to reward the entire school staff for increased test scores, thus ensuring everyone, including librarians and support staff, can benefit from financial incentives, said Erick Huth, Metro Nashville Education Association president.

In 2006, the union squashed an experiment with merit pay because of concerns over the details, including how achievement would be measured.

Huth said the union is open to discussing merit pay, so long as it is a plan that benefits teachers.

The effort is helped along by support from Mayor Karl Dean and Jesse Register, the new director of schools.

As schools chief in Chattanooga, Register negotiated bonus pay for teachers as part of the Benwood Initiative, a nationally lauded experiment in urban school reform.

Register said the payouts were based on value-added scores, which measure students' year-to-year growth.

Dean gave Obama's speech high marks and said many of the ideas line up with what he believes needs to be done in Nashville.

"I think we need to reward those who are doing the most difficult work and who are doing it the best," Dean said.

"Rewarding quality is the No. 1 thing we need to do with teacher compensation, and hearing that from our president was fantastic."
